

## **Inception Meeting Report**

### ***Ocean Country Partnership Program: Sri Lanka Sri Lanka Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Mapping***



***Cinnamon Grand Hotel in Colombo  
25<sup>th</sup> September 2024***

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# 1. Introduction

## Project summary

The Sri Lanka Marine Protected Area (MPA) Network Mapping project, led by Environmental Foundation (Guarantee) Limited (EFL) with Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) under the Ocean Country Partnership Program funded by the UK government through under the Blue Planet Fund Program. This project aims to develop a comprehensive map of Sri Lanka's MPA network that will bring together spatial data from existing sources from the various relevant government institutions, identify gaps, and provide recommendations on network expansion to include by including critical sensitive habitats, species and species communities. This initiative will also provide recommendations for improving the management, regulation, and coherence of MPAs in the country.

## Inception meeting

On September 25, 2024, EFL organized an inception workshop at Cinnamon Grand Hotel in Colombo, to kick off the above project with the main stakeholders and partners. Over 40 participants attended the meeting.

## Objectives

The overarching objectives of the inception meeting were to:

1. Identify agency focal points for project activities
2. Create synergies and facilitate discussions with major stakeholders
3. Determine ongoing and past work related to MPAs in Sri Lanka
4. Identify the data needs and interagency requirements with MPA management
5. Gap analysis

## 2. Opening remarks and Project progress

All attendees were welcomed, and a brief introduction of the project team and their respective roles was presented by Dr. Eric Wikramanayake, Director of Environmental Foundation Limited.

followed by Dr. Suleka Madhubashini, Head of Science at Environmental Foundation Limited, who invited the attendees to actively participate and maintain open communication throughout the meeting to ensure that the collective effort of all stakeholders is effectively harnessed after highlighting the project goals and progress.



The key stakeholders and organizations in attendance were acknowledged, highlighting the significance of their participation in driving the project forward.

A summary of the MPA Network Mapping Project was provided, detailing its primary objectives, anticipated outcomes, project plans, timelines, and the key gaps that have been identified. The discussion highlighted the pivotal role that MPA mapping plays in achieving crucial conservation goals, such as safeguarding marine biodiversity and reinforcing national conservation commitments while laying a foundation for future economic sustainability.

The long-term benefits of the project were emphasized, particularly in terms of improving the management of marine resources and enhancing biodiversity protection across the nation's marine ecosystems. The session also stressed the importance of collaboration across multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, conservationists, and local communities, as a key factor for the successful mapping and management of MPAs.



In terms of project progress, the collection of necessary gazettes and shape files from the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), the Coast Conservation & Coastal Resource Management Department (CC & CRMD), and the Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DFAR) was successfully completed. The development of the MPA map has commenced, utilizing the collected hard-copy gazettes, which are currently being digitized for integration into the project's digital mapping efforts.

### 3. Presentations of key stakeholders

#### Department of Wildlife and Conservation

Ms. Rekha Sanjeevani, Assistant Director, Marine, DWC provided a presentation on the current status and future plans regarding MPAs under the DWC. Key points from her presentation included,

- There are currently 9 fully marine-protected areas managed by the DWC.
- There are 19 protected areas that include both marine and terrestrial components
- The DWC has identified 8 new MPAs that will be formally declared and gazette, namely Mirissa Marine Sanctuary, Iranathiv Island Sanctuary (seagrass and corals), Thalawila Sanctuary, Wilpattu West Sanctuary, Silawathura Coral and Seagrass Bed Sanctuary, Shipwreck Sanctuary – Phase 1, Kalpitiya Marine Sanctuary, and Trinco Marine Sanctuary.



DWC's ongoing efforts to draft a new regulatory framework for marine sanctuaries were highlighted during the presentation. Under this regulation, the proposed MPAs will be designated as marine sanctuaries. Notably, these sanctuaries will allow many customary activities, such as fishing and tourism, to continue with minimal restrictions, ensuring that conservation efforts coexist with sustainable livelihood opportunities.

The DWC has identified several challenges in the management and declaration of MPAs, such as opposition to MPA Declaration, boundary demarcation challenges, limited staff and resource allocation, lack of public awareness, difficulties in law enforcement, challenges from natural phenomena and marine pollution.

To address these challenges, several ongoing and proposed actions were outlined such as collaborative policy development, enhanced boundary demarcation, reducing marine pollution, capacity building for DWC Staff, public awareness campaigns, public awareness campaigns, marine habitat restoration programs and cross- border collaboration.

## Coast Conservation and Coastal Resources Management Department

Mr. B.H.J. Premathilake, Deputy Director (Coastal Resource Management) of CC & CRMD, presented an overview of the legal framework and policies related to coastal conservation in Sri Lanka. His presentation focused on the evolution of the Coast Conservation Act and its role in safeguarding coastal ecosystems. Key points of the presentation were,

- The Coast Conservation Act was originally approved by Parliament in 1981 and later amended in 1987 and 2011 to incorporate principles of ecosystem-based management. These amendments provided legal backing for more comprehensive management approaches in the coastal zone.
- The National Coastal Zone Management Plan was first developed in 1990, which was revised in 1997 and 2004 to adapt to changing environmental and socio-economic conditions.
- The Coast Conservation Department, established in 1983 under the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, was entrusted with the responsibility of implementing these policies.
- Over the years, the department tested various coastal management methods, including both top-down and co-management strategies, to address the complex needs of the coastal regions.
- The Special Area Management approach was introduced, allowing areas within or adjacent to the coastal zone to be declared as "Conservation Areas" for the protection of ecosystems.
- Legal provisions for ecosystem-based management and conservation were strengthened through the Coast Conservation and Coastal Resource Management Act No. 49 of 2011.
- Certain areas were designated as "Affected Areas," where development activities and the collection of aquatic resources was restricted.



Mr. Premathilake noted that, to date, no MPAs have been declared under the Coast Conservation Act. This is primarily due to a lack of capacity within the department to enforce MPA regulations effectively. Although the legal provisions are in place, enforcement remains a significant challenge.

The importance of building enforcement capacity and developing institutional resources to support the declaration and management of MPAs under the Coast Conservation framework was highlighted.

## 4. Summary of the Q & A session



Participants raised concerns, which were addressed at the institutional level during the meeting. A summary of the comments, feedback, questions, and corresponding solutions is provided below.

### **Mr. R. M. N. P. K. Ranathunga (NAQDA-Assistant Director)**

- When declaring the proposed sanctuaries, it is crucial to consider ongoing aquaculture activities, particularly in the northern region (e.g.-: sea cucumber farming, sea cages, seaweed farming, and ornamental fish farming). Consideration of these activities will help minimize the impact on local livelihoods and sustain the economic benefits they provide.
- Engage in discussions with the district coordination committee regarding this matter to ensure that local aquaculture activities are considered during the sanctuary declaration process.
- There is a need to regularly update the information, at least every 10 years' time, to facilitate more effective management of aquaculture-related activities. Keeping the data current will ensure that management strategies remain relevant and responsive to evolving conditions, supporting sustainable practices and minimizing potential conflicts.

### **Mr. Manjula Amararathna (DWC- Director, PA Management)**

- Initial discussions were conducted by DWC with relevant stakeholders (e.g.: - Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources- DFAR) prior to declaring the sanctuaries to avoid conflicts with other departmental activities. In the future, DWC will also engage with other relevant stakeholders like NAQDA and others to gather their input and address any concerns.
- Marine spatial planning is an ongoing process, and a forum will be held soon to highlight and identify suitable areas for aquaculture and other economically beneficial activities, as well as areas prioritized for conservation with close coordination and engagement with all relevant stakeholders.

**Mr. B.H.J. Premathilake (CC & CRMD- Deputy Director)**

- The Coast Conservation and Coastal Resource Management Act mandates that any activity within the coastal zone must obtain a permit before commencing. Given the diverse range of activities associated with the coastal zone, it becomes challenging to manage all of them simultaneously. Prioritizing the effective management of these areas is essential to address this complexity and ensure sustainable use of coastal resources.

**Dr. Ananda Mallawathanthri**

- Suggested that the project should develop a management effectiveness tracking system for MPAs that includes key performance indicators related to biodiversity, air quality, water quality, soil quality, and ocean health that designate the responsible parties for tracking these metrics, which will aid in EIAs in the future.
- Implement ecosystem services quantification as part of natural capital accounting to measure the economic value and benefits derived from ecosystems, supporting more sustainable decision-making.
- Few projects are currently ongoing, such as the Global Fund for Coral Reefs, the Commonwealth-funded Strategic Environment Assessment tool for Marine Spatial Planning for Sri Lanka with a special focus on Northwestern Sri Lanka and Marine Investment Planning by ERD/NPD with the support of UNDP. It is important to ensure that these efforts do not overlap, avoiding duplication and promoting better coordination between projects to optimize resources and outcomes.
- It was acknowledged that certain populations will be affected after these projects, necessitating the provision of alternative employment or subsidies, while highlighting the need for the Sri Lankan monetary system to adopt cross-subsidies which should be incorporated into the recommendation process for marine spatial planning projects.
- It is essential to outline a clear method for defining the MPA in the methodology section.
- Developing the methodology to transform the project from a mapping initiative into an analytical study is essential.
- A Strategic Environmental Assessment will be needed to harmonize conservation efforts with developmental goals.

**Dr. Jagath Gunawardena**

- Emphasized the collaborative efforts of three key stakeholders—DWC, DFAR, and CC & CRMD in effectively declaring MPAs while considering the three relevant enactments of the Flora and Fauna Protection Act, the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act, and the Coast Conservation and Coastal Resource Management Act.
- Recommendations for the way forward were highlighted including the necessity of fostering greater collaboration between agencies to work towards a common purpose

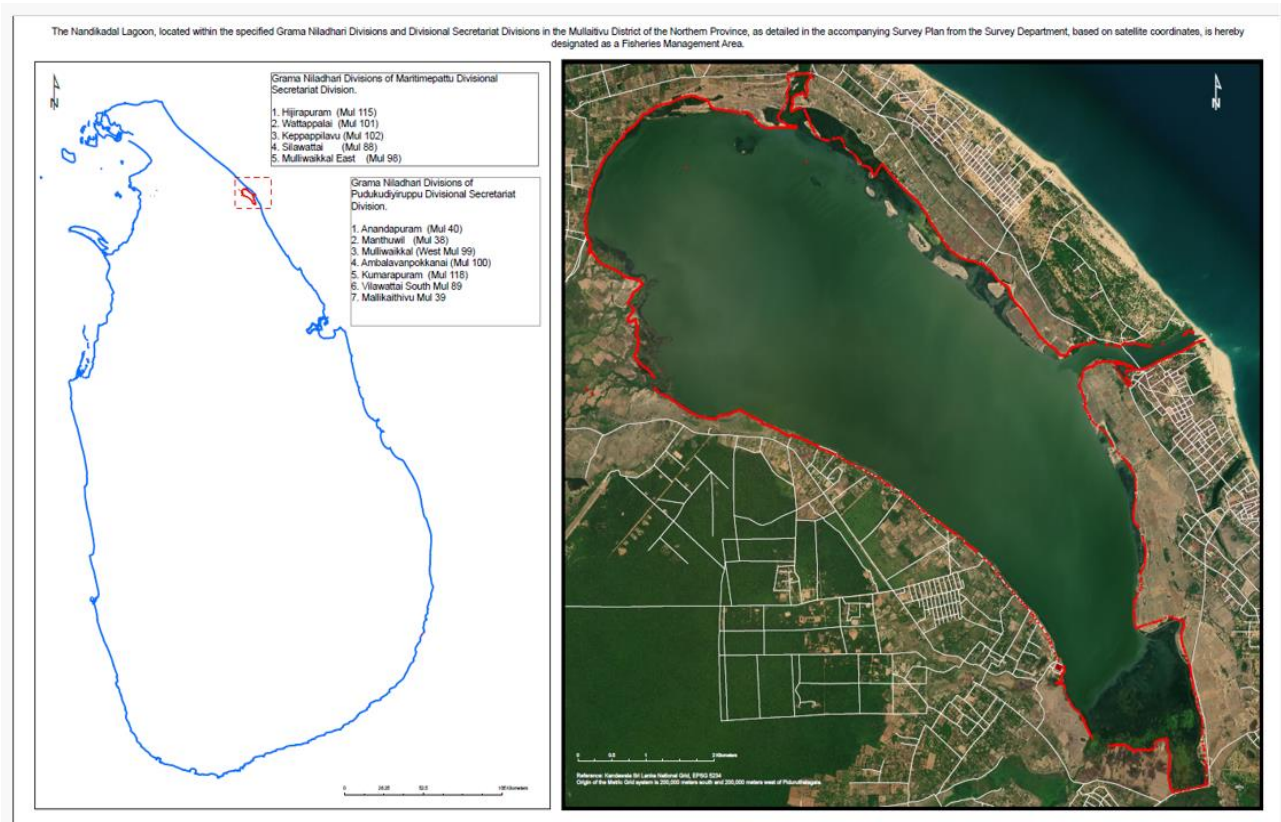


and the importance of amending certain legal provisions to address emerging illegal activities, enabling other agencies to contribute to their management and enforcement was highlighted.

## 5. Presentation by the GIS Specialist & Discussion session

The GIS Specialist outlined the scope of responsibilities, the gaps identified during the mapping preparation process, and key deliverables for the MPA mapping network project.

A preview of the methodology was provided, focusing on the digitization of the Nandikadal Lagoon as an example.



The importance of developing a national-level biodiversity database to support conservation efforts and effective MPA management was highlighted.

During the discussion session after the presentation, several key contributions were made by stakeholders.

- Ms. L.P.M. Hasanthi, Development officer from the Department of Forest shared that updated data on mangroves and digitized datasets relevant to the MPA project are available through her department, and highlighting their importance for the mapping process.
- Mr. Nandana Mahakumarage, GIS Specialist at UNDP, confirmed that a complete set of coordinates for mapping is already available with the National Planning Department of Ministry of Environment. He emphasized the need for a comprehensive biodiversity analysis to inform more effective decision-making, noting that while data on the protected area network exists, biodiversity data remains insufficient.
- Mr. Nishan Perera, Director of Blue Resource Trust, discussed the challenges in identifying biodiversity hotspots and highlighted the importance of clearly defined conservation targets. He emphasized the importance of identifying specific ecosystems or habitats prior to MPA declarations along with their conservation objectives which will ensure appropriate coverage, focus on habitat connectivity, and effective management strategies.
- Mr. Muditha Katuwawela, Coordinator of The Pearl Protectors, pointed out the significance of enforcement, monitoring, and boundary identification for MPAs. Few examples of illegal activities, such as dynamite fishing on the east coast and speargun fishing in Hikkaduwa, that often go unnoticed due to low awareness levels were highlighted.
- Commander Prashan Perera from Sri Lanka Coast Guard emphasized the need of consider degraded biodiversity and areas when conducting MPA assessments, ensuring that these factors are included in decision-making processes.

## **6. Group Discussion**

### **Criteria:**

Three main criteria were provided to guide the group discussion in order to gather maximum information from the participants.

### **1. Institutional Contributions to the Project**

#### **A. Data needs**

1. Spatial Coordinates - accurate geolocation data for all MPAs, including boundaries and associated habitats.
2. Biodiversity Data - information on species presence, abundance, and critical habitats within MPAs.
3. Socio-Economic Data - insights into community dependencies on marine resources, including fishing and tourism metrics.
4. Management Frameworks - existing management plans, enforcement records, and inter-agency agreements related to MPAs.
5. Historical Data - longitudinal data on habitat and species changes over time, including human impacts.

#### **B. Expertise Required**

1. Marine Ecologists - specialists in marine biodiversity to gather data on habitat quality and species distributions.
2. GIS Analysts - experts in managing spatial data collection and mapping, particularly in data-limited contexts.
3. Sociologists/Anthropologists - gather stakeholder assessments data and understand community dynamics related to MPAs.
4. Legal Experts - specialists in environmental law to review governance frameworks and recommend improvements.

### **2. Feedback and comments on mapping**

### **3. Identified Gaps and Proposed Remedies for Current MPAs**

Three groups provided their insights on the data needs, gaps, and institutional contributions required to support the MPA mapping project.

**Group 1** emphasized the importance of requesting existing data from the Department of External Resources to identify any current data gaps. They also suggested that additional data could be obtained from other government institutions and NGOs to help mitigate time constraints. Furthermore, they noted that gaps in marine conservation, management, and decision-making should be addressed through scientific research, as some relevant fields currently lack comprehensive data.



**Group 2** focused on key data sources.

- Spatial coordinate data for coastal management areas and fisheries zones is available through DFAR and CC & CRMD.
- Fisheries catch data and species-level information can be sourced from DFAR and NARA.
- Data on coastal forts, fishery harbors, fishing grounds, crowdsourced bathymetry, marine mammals, and sea turtles is accessible online through the Sri Lanka Navy website.
- Biodiversity data is available from the Biodiversity Secretariat under the Ministry of Environment and NARA.
- Socio-economic data can be found from Divisional and District Secretariat profiles.



### Group 3

- Data needs for the project were highlighted including, area demarcations, biodiversity data, sensitive areas, socio-economic information, illegal activities (such as construction, transactions, fishing, and trafficking), fishery management areas, fisheries operations licenses, vessel registrations, encroachments, and marine incidents.
- The group also highlighted the required expertise in GIS, biodiversity, law enforcement, protected area management, sociology, communications (particularly in training and awareness), and database management.
- Furthermore, they identified key institutions, such as DWC, DFAR, and CC & CRMD, as essential for gathering data on boundary demarcations, biodiversity, law enforcement, and conservation. For law enforcement and pollution control, institutions like the Police, Navy, Coast Guard, Central Environmental Authority, and Marine Environment Protection Authority, NARA and the Zoological Gardens were identified as key sources for species identification data.



## 7. Open Discussion

The open discussion highlighted several key points for the project's progress.

- It was agreed that immediate action should be taken to formally request data from the Department of National Planning, as this information is crucial for moving forward with the MPA network mapping project.
- Participants emphasized the importance of incorporating a data-sharing component into the project. However, they noted that some parties may be cautious about sharing sensitive information, particularly when the data is gathered through grants or external funding. It was underscored that all shared data must be handled responsibly, ensuring its appropriate use and proper attribution, while preventing any misuse or unauthorized publication. This will help build trust and encourage greater collaboration among stakeholders.



## 8. Closing remarks

Dr. Chaturangi Wickramaratne, a Director of EFL, officially brought the session to a close, highlighting the importance of the collaborative input provided by all participants. The session included a review of efforts to engage relevant stakeholders and assess their ongoing work, ensuring that duplication was avoided, and data gaps were identified. It was emphasized that the data collected during the meeting was shared to promote continued collaboration and contribute to the project's development. Dr. Suleka Madhubashini extended her thanks to all attendees for their valuable participation and contributions, which will guide the next steps of the MPA network mapping project.





# 9. Preliminary Map of MPAs in Sri Lanka

